

# UNITED STATES EXPLORING EXPEDITION

## 1838-1842

From the The Charles McSorley Collection  
Presidential Coin & Antique Co.  
Joe Levine



U.S.S. Vincennes in the ice

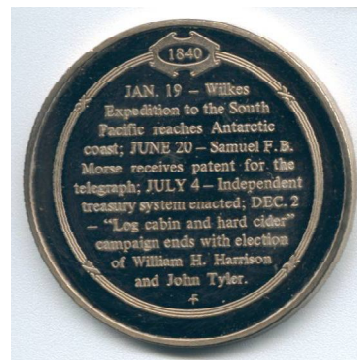


RARE WILKES EXPEDITION TOKEN, 1839. 25mm. White Metal. Reeded edge. F/VF. Holed at top.

Obverse with UNITED STATES OF AMERICA surrounding a displayed eagle perched on a hemisphere of a globe. The reverse legend: EXPLORING EXPEDITION surrounds U.S. SHIP. Below is c/s VINCENNES and at bottom, the date 1839, both with a logotype punch. The United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42, or the Wilkes Expedition as it is more commonly known, was authorized for the primary purpose of aiding commerce and navigation in the Antarctic and South Pacific and also "to extend the bounds of science and to promote knowledge." In April of 1838, 4 naval vessels were assigned to the expedition, with the **Vincennes**, a sloop of war of 780 tons, designated as the flagship. Other vessels were the **Peacock**, a sloop of war of 650 tons, the **Porpoise**, a brig of 230 tons, and the store ship, **Relief**. Two pilot boats, the schooners **Sea Gull** and **Flying Fish** were purchased to be used as survey vessels close in to shore. The Vincennes had already proved itself a sturdy vessel, being the first American naval ship to circumnavigate the globe (1829-30.)



On January 6, 1839, the expedition set forth for Antarctica, the first of two voyages to that region. One of the major achievements of these voyages was a 1,600 mile survey of the coast of Antarctica. As a result, Wilkes declared discovery of the Antarctic continent, dating that discovery January 19, 1840. As a by-product of their four year exploration, the expedition brought back to the United States a wealth of geological, botanical, zoologi-



cal, anthropological and other materials which created a foundation upon which much of American science was formed. At least three of the scientists involved with the expedition gained international acclaim for their efforts.

(continued on page 31)

# EDITORIAL

Thanks are due to several people that provided or offered help with our lead article this month. First and foremost, our thanks go to Mr. Joseph Levine of Presidential Coin & Antique Company of Alexandria, Virginia. I guess we can blame Mr. Levine also, as the arrival of his latest auction catalogue triggered my memory of these medals. Mr. Levine graciously provided the information required to build this article. Mr. Richard Crosby provided a copy of the McSorley catalogue so that we could get a good scan of the medal.

Thanks must also be extended to Mr. Peter Irion of TAMS, Mr. R.W. Julian and Mr. Fuld for providing or offering to provide scans of the medals used to illustrate this article.

It has been a banner year for numismatic celebrities in Fairbanks. First to stop in was Don Bonser, dealer and a writer for *The Numismatist*. Colonel Bill Murray (numismatic writer - watch for us in *Coin World*!) made his third (or was it fourth?) trip to Alaska. And just today, as I type this, Cliff Mishler of Krause Publications popped in and left a memento for us. It is always a treat to visit with numismatists passing through. It gets real old talking with Cleworth day after day!



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# WEB SITE REVIEW

This may seem a bit odd, but this is sort of like a book review. In the Saturday, June 2 issue of the Fairbanks Daily News Miner, there was an article about a meeting held at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks titled "Meeting of Frontiers." This discusses the relationship of Russia, Siberia and Alaska. At the end of the article, it directs the reader to a web site:

<http://frontiers.loc.gov>

This site is a joint effort of the Library of Congress, the Russian State Library, the National Library of Russia, the Elmer C. Rasmussen Library of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and the Institute of History of the Siberian Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Novosibirsk).

The site is in both English and Russian. It examines the relationship of Russia, Siberia and Alaska, but it also explores the similarities of Russia's eastward expansion into Siberia and Alaska with the U.S. expansion westward.

Readers can select "Alaska, Russia and the Meeting of Frontiers" and then select: Exploration, Colonization, Development, Alaska, National Identity, or Mutual Perceptions. For example, under Alaska, sub-headings are Russian Discovery, Russian Colonization, Sale of Alaska, Gold Rush, American Colonization, Pioneer Women, Tourism and Transportation, and Popular Culture. As can be seen from the list of topics, one could spend considerable time exploring.

Another selection the reader can make is to browse the digital selections available on line from four of the "partners." Searches are also possible. Through searching the site, one finds many photos, including panoramic photos, one of Fairbanks!



I did not take the time to thoroughly search this site. There are nooks and crannies on this site that I have not entered. These could lead somewhere totally unexpected. Think I will save that for next winter (only three months away). It will provide an evening's entertainment.

# U.S. EXPLORING EXPEDITION, CONT.

The first auction appearance of any token related to this Exploring Expedition was in the 1884 Sale of the J.N.T. Levick Collection, #2466, where an example without the c/s name of a ship was described as “Believed to be unique” and plated. It sold for a respectable \$2.00. In Thomas Elder’s sale of 2/2-3/17, #818, a piece bearing the name of the U.S.S. **Porpoise**, but without any date, was described.



White metal, 25mm, reeded edge

What may have been that very same piece appeared in B&M’s 3/85 Sale of the Russell B. Patterson Collection, #1907. That piece realized \$385.00. In that same sale, an unnamed example in Fine condition was sold for \$132.00.

In our Landmark Sale of 3/76, #575, we offered J. Doyle DeWitt’s specimen of one of these tokens c/s **Peacock** and dated 1839. At that time, we hadn’t a clue about the history of the piece and wrote little more than a brief description of it: “Unlisted in Curto. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA eagle ctr. rev. EXPLORING EXPEDITION 1839 around edge. U.S. SHIP/ (incused) PEACOCK. white Metal holed at top. Bright AU. Ex-DeWitt.” It sold for \$76.00.

One of our clients owns a piece identical to that offered here which he thinks he obtained from a Kurt Krueger Auction sometime in the 1970s.

The token offered here has to be the most desirable of the four known types in that it was the flagship of the expedition (**Vincennes**) and because it is dated. A rare opportunity to acquire an important historical and scientific artifact. (I)

6397. #194. WM. F/VF. \$412.50

\* \* \* \* \*

Thus ends Mr. Levine’s description of the U.S.S. Vincennes medal.

While most of the research conducted on this expedition was of a tropical nature, the excursions into Antarctic waters, and its discoveries while there, make these medals of interest to us.

In the description of the “**Porpoise**” specimen in the Patterson Collection, Bowers and Merena speculate that the “medals were struck for members of the crew, and were meant to be inscribed with the recipient’s name and the name of the vessel on which he served during the expedition.” They go on to state that “Several exploring expedition medals survive, the majority of them being unnamed as to recipient or vessel’s name.”

It is your editor’s opinion that they may have served this purpose, but that they were also a trade or gift item for the peoples encountered on the expedition: “The ships carried trade goods, gifts and orders to make friends wherever possible” (Magnificent Voyagers). This would not be unlike the HBMS Adventure and Beagle medals (see ATC&PN June, 1995).

\* \* \* \* \*

The United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842, was authorized by congress in response to popular demand. Charged with gathering information to aid commerce and navigation, it also was “to extend the bounds of science and promote knowledge.” It did this by collecting thousands of biological and geological specimens. Many of these specimens are now part of the Smithsonian Institution. The live plant specimens formed the basis of the national Botanical Gardens.

The ships involved were the sloop of war Vincennes (flagship) and Peacock, the brig Porpoise, the store ship Relief and two pilot boats Sea Gull and Flying Fish. The Sea Gull disappeared off the Chile coast in April 1839. The Relief was sent home in 1839 while enroute to the Antarctic. The Peacock was lost off the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon. No lives were lost, but its scientific collections were a total loss. It was replaced by the brig Thomas H. Perkins, rechristened the U.S.S. Oregon. The Flying Fish, worn and weakened, was sold in Singapore before the final leg of the expedition across the Indian Ocean and around the Cape of Good Hope.

In an episode illustrating the vagueries and hazards of navigating in the early 19th century, the Vincennes and



# U.S. EXPLORING EXPEDITION, CONT.

Porpoise rendezvoused at “Emerald Island,” only to find that there was no land at that point in the southern ocean. Emerald Island was a phantom.

The U.S. Exploring Expedition was not the only expedition in the Antarctic at the time. A French expedition commanded by Dumont d’Urville and a British expedition under James Clark Ross were in the same area. National rivalries provided some color to the expedition.

Cadwalader Ringgold, commander of the Porpoise sighted and recognized Dumont d’Urville’s ships, and changed course to intercept. He misread the movements of the French, and assumed they were trying to avoid a meeting.



Ross disputed Wilkes discoveries, claiming to have sailed through that land the Wilkes discovered. Recent studies by two Australians have shown that Wilkes

was off in his positioning by 116 miles to the south and 18 miles to the west, amazingly accurate for the instruments of the day, and the conditions in which they were used.

The United States Exploring Expedition made significant contributions to many fields of science. It also served to enhance the stature of the young nation.

## SOURCES:

**The Charles McSorley Collection**, Presidential Coin & Antique Company, Inc., November 15, 1997.

**Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842**, Charles Wilkes, Philadelphia, 1845.

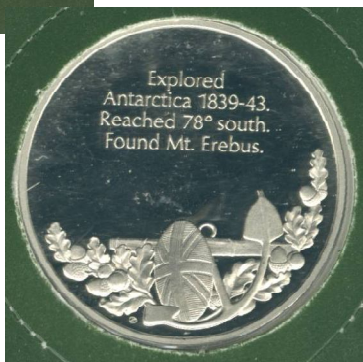
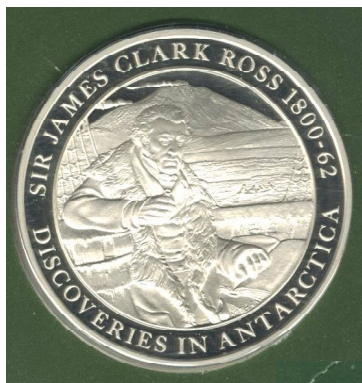
**Russell B. Patterson Collection**, Bowers & Merena, March, 1985.

**Magnificent Voyagers: The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842**. Herman Viola and Carolyn Margolis, editors. Smithsonian Institution, 1985.

<http://www.south-pole.com>

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## ARGENTINE ANTARCTIC MEDAL

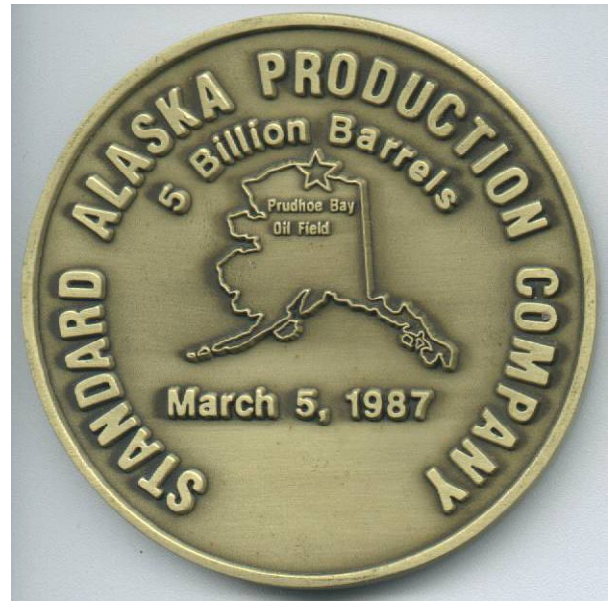
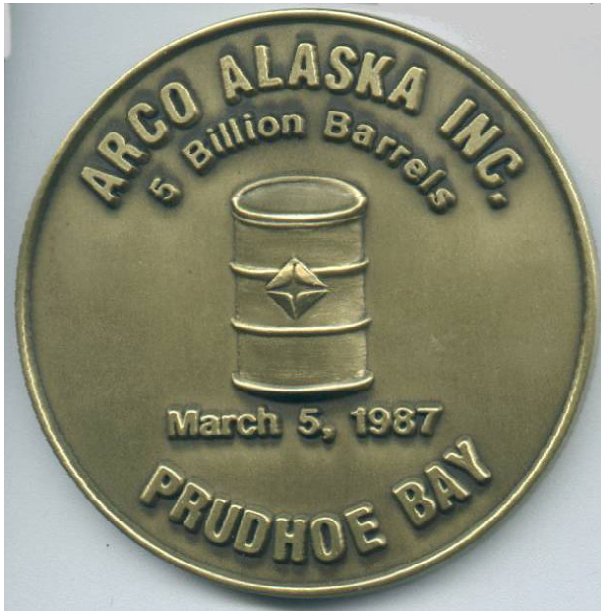


An interesting medal made of “Alpaca,” a nickel-brass alloy, 32.5mm (36.5 with loop). From an early tour to the Antarctic??

Cruceros a la Antartida Argentina (Cruises to Argentine Antarctica), 1974-75.

Bienstar Social Ministerio del Pueblo Secretaria de Estado de deportes y turismimo (Government Social Welfare Ministry, Secretary of State of Sports and Tourism).

# PIPELINE MEMORABILIA



**PRUDHOE BAY:** We have seen this before, but have not had one to offer for sale. This is a nice, large, 76.5 mm bronze medal. Only one in stock. A phone call or an email would be recommended to place this on hold. **\$45.00**



During the pipeline, maps cut from the actual pipe was quite popular. This map has three Prudhoe Bay/Valdez pipeline medals attached. A "weld" marks the route of the pipeline. It measures about 265mm (10.5 inches) across the base from the tip of the Aleutians to the tip of southeast Alaska, and stands about 185mm (7.25 inches) high. There is a hole in the back for hanging. We only have one, so a phone call or email to reserve this is recommended. This is a very heavy item, but postage is included in the price: **\$125.00**